We Neglect Religion at Our Peril

By Douglas M. Johnston

Given the religious component of so many of today's hostilities, chaplains can and should play a larger role in peace making and conflict prevention.

When Admiral William Owens was Commander, U.S. Sixth Fleet, a decade or so ago, he received a message from the president of the former Yugoslavia requesting more port visits by U.S. ships (to help keep the lid on as things were beginning to heat up). The request was vetoed by the State Department on the grounds that Yugoslavia was a European problem and ought not to involve the United States. Although the ship visits might not have made a significant difference in view of the deeper issues at play, one nevertheless wonders what might have been, considering the $53 billion we now have spent in Bosnia and Kosovo.

It is time for the United States to get serious about developing an effective conflict-prevention capability. The specter of ethnic and religious passions coupled with weapons of mass destruction demands no less. For far too long, our focus has been reactive, requiring enormous investments of talent and treasure to pick up the pieces after hostilities have broken out.

So, what can be done? Given the religious component of so many of today's hostilities, a good starting point would be to expand the role of U.S. Navy and Marine Corps chaplains, since they serve the commands that typically are at the cutting edge of U.S. involvement overseas. Their multifaith experience, interpersonal skills, temperament, and education uniquely equip them for the complex challenges of prevention. Moreover, chaplains are a resource-in-being, with a long-standing religious mandate (which finesses the battle of the budget and any apprehensions about separation of church and state).

The Religious Factor

Religion is central to identity and gives meaning to people's lives. It also is central to much of the strife taking place in the world today.1 Almost anywhere one turns—Afghanistan, Kosovo, Indonesia, Nigeria, Chechnya, Kashmir, Sudan, Sri Lanka—one finds a religious dimension to hostilities. Whether it is the root cause of a conflict, as in the Middle East, or merely a mobilizing vehicle for nationalist and ethnic passions, as has been the case in the Balkans, religion possesses an unrivaled potential to cause instability at all levels of the global system. In all likelihood, its importance will continue to increase in response to (1) the perceived threat to traditional values posed by globalization, and (2) the uncertainties stemming from the revolutionary pace of technology change. To underestimate these realities in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy is to tempt the gods, so to speak.

Past reluctance to consider religious factors has not been without its costs. The U.S. failure in Iran was the result, at least in part, of our not understanding or responding to the religious dynamics. The President and top policymakers in Washington were caught unaware by the Islamic revolution.2 They should not have been. State Department reports at the time noted that the Ayatollah Khomeini had emerged as the most outspoken critic of the government, that the Shah's Islamic opponents were in a strong position, and that the Shah's days probably were

numbered.3 These observations were suppressed at higher levels by the combined influence of dogmatic secularism and economic determinism.

Greater recognition and accommodation of the religious dimension might not have altered the outcome, but had religious factors been considered early on, the improvements in our ability to anticipate and react conceivably could have spared us untold national embarrassment (and the embassy staff in Tehran some 444 days of anguish). The same also could be said of Lebanon (and the loss of 241 U.S. Marines).

Today, this oversight continues to play out on numerous fronts. South Asia, for example, is replete with ethnoreligious challenges that are being dealt with along traditional secularist lines. Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir stare nervously at one another through the cross-hairs of their rifle sights or, more ominously, their nuclear delivery systems—ever susceptible to the flames of nationalism and religious unrest. In Sri Lanka, the tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism have been perverted to justify a stream of military atrocities between the Buddhist majority and the Tamil separatists. Then there is Indonesia, an immense archipelago straddling a number of the world's vital shipping lanes. Once thought a rock of stability, it is wracked with religious violence so severe that some fear the country's outright disintegration. Further to the west, Muslims and Jews square off in the Middle East over their mutual religious claims to Jerusalem, as terrorists find continuing inspiration to play their deadly game.

A recent example of Western indifference to religious imperatives was the NATO decision to bomb Serbia on Orthodox Easter, despite ardent pleas from the Orthodox Church. Although the issue was debated intensely, the decision apparently was taken out of a concern that if the bombing were to stop, it might prove difficult to get the allies to reengage the following day. Whatever the rationale, the Serbs were quick to point out that the only others to have bombed them on this holy day were the Germans in World War II. It is a decision they will not forget.

A proper consideration of the religious factors, however, will not necessarily ensure a predictable outcome. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, for example, there was considerable hand-wringing in U.S. policy circles leading up to Ramadan on whether to continue the bombing of Afghanistan during this period of religious celebration. The concern was well placed; only in this instance, historical precedence suggested a greater room for maneuver.

The first consideration in such a decision is understanding exactly what the observance is about. Then it becomes instructive to examine how Muslims themselves have dealt with this same issue. During the Iran-Iraq War, for example, both sides fought through Ramadan every year of the conflict (although Saddam Hussein once offered a cease-fire, only to have it rejected by the Ayatollah Khomeini). In 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel during Ramadan. While commonly referred to in the West as the Yom Kippur War, among Muslims it is known as the Ramadan War. Finally, in 624 A.D., Mohammed himself conquered the holy city of Mecca during Ramadan. While none of this should be viewed as a license to do as one pleases, it does provide a helpful context for determining how to deal with such questions.

Without the bipolar confrontation of the Cold War to dampen its influence, religion has become too critical to vital U.S. national interests to permit its continued marginalization. In an age of economic interdependency, high-tech weaponry, and international terrorism, we must give the religious factor its due as a defining element of national security and learn how to deal with it.

A New Approach

In 2000, the senior command of the sea service chaplains noted the potential for expanding the chaplain's role and initiated training for the entire corps—more than 1,000 Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard chaplains—on "the complex and profound role of religion in statecraft as it shapes both cultural and political attitudes toward war and peace across the international geopolitical spectrum." The intent was to examine the role chaplains can play in peace making. Navy Chief of Chaplains Rear Admiral Barry Black noted in his training letter to the chaplains:

This is not an area in which we have traditionally been involved. Nevertheless, it is an aspect of institutional ministry that chaplains need to understand, and in which we need to involve ourselves. Emerging military missions are thrusting us to the forefront. Our faith communities have much to contribute, and the institutions we serve need our help in coming to grips with the impact of religious heritage on the international community. . . . The principles we will examine are an important step toward preparing us to serve not only as effective ethical advisors, but also as agents of reconciliation.

Over the past six months, the Washington-based International Center for Religion and Diplomacy led this training effort. The curriculum included:

- **The resurgence of religion**
- **The impact of globalization**
- **The changing nature of conflict**
- **The need to create an effective preventive capability and the obstacles to doing so**
- **How belief systems of the major world religions have contributed to conflict and to preventing or resolving it**
- **The potential contribution of chaplains to developing a preventive capability**
- **Tools to assist chaplains in their expanded role**

In addition, the course highlighted the need to understand and deal with the burdens of history, which give rise to the rage seen in so many places. The Serbs are today's perpetrators, but they were yesterday's victims. It also explored our own nation's burdens relating to the Civil War and its lingering aftermath to illustrate the gut-wrenching nature of the problems chaplains are likely to encounter in trouble spots overseas. The training concluded with an exercise in which the chaplains developed a strategy for preventive engagement in a challenging scenario relating to a port visit in the Crimea. The chaplains both readily assimilated what was being conveyed and displayed considerable creativity and imagination in dealing with the hypothetical problems posed.

Throughout the training, there were constant reminders that the primary task of chaplains is to provide spiritual counsel to the men and women of their commands. Accordingly, it is crucial in this expanded context that they not allow their pastoral credibility to be undermined by any perceived intelligence or diplomatic function—a delicate balance to maintain.

Expanding the Toolbox

With this training and an expanded mission statement, chaplains can provide an invaluable early warning function for their forward-deployed commands based on personal interactions with local religious communities and selected nongovernmental organizations with which they come in contact. Not only will they be able to develop a grass-roots understanding of the religious and cultural nuances at play, but they also will be able to pass on the concerns of indigenous religious leaders about incipient threats to stability posed by ethnoreligious demagogues. At times, they also might be able to provide a reconciling influence in addressing misunderstandings or differences with these communities. Finally, they can advise

their commanders on the religious and cultural aspects of decisions that are being taken (or that should be taken). As Admiral Charles Abbot, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. European Command, noted in an address at the 1999 U.S. European Command Military Chiefs of Chaplains Conference:

The role of chaplains at the strategic level of military planning is the greatest area of growth in [terms of their total] responsibilities. The way the world has evolved, it has become crucial to better understand the religious and cultural histories of peoples involved in conflicts.

This was reaffirmed at the same conference by U.S. Air Force Major General Wax, Director of Plans and Policy for the U.S. European Command:

I expect my chaplains to come prepared to help me and the other military commanders understand how to work with other peoples and other nations: both those who claim a specific religion or belief structure and those who do not. . . . If your strategy is to engage, you must avoid an insult due to ignorance; the chaplain must help the Commander's awareness here.

In the European Command, which encompasses some 89 countries in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, chaplains are serving as a bridge to other military and civilian communities. In other words, in addition to their ongoing function of addressing human casualties after conflict has erupted, they are becoming an important tool in preventing its eruption in the first instance.

In meeting the challenges of the nation's preventive agenda, Navy and Marine Corps chaplains have a critical role to play. The sea service commands need to provide chaplains with expanded rules of engagement commensurate with the training they have received, and to develop a preventive mind-set themselves if they are to remain effective in an increasingly turbulent world.

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1. "The World at War, January 1, 2001," *The Defense Monitor* 30, no. 1 (January 2001). *(back to article)*

2. Charles-Philippe David, Mary Ann Carol, and Zachary A. Selden, *Foreign Policy Failures in the White House: Reappraising the Fall of the Shah and the Iran-Contra Affair* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), p. 51. *(back to article)*

3. "Iran: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1977-1980," *National Security Archive* (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healy, 1990), IR 03561. *(back to article)*

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